NURSING GRADUATES' PREPARATION TO PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Kathrine H. McGill[1], *Sunddip Panesar-Aguilar[2], Amy Herrington[3]

[1]EdD, MSN, RN, Health Sciences, Hillsborough Community College, Tampa, Florida, USA – 33511

[2]EdD, College of Health Sciences, University of St. Augustine, St. Augustine, USA – 32086. (*Corresponding Author)

[3]DNP, RN, College of Health Sciences, University of St. Augustine, St. Augustine, USA – 32086.

ABSTRACT

The shortage of nurses to provide safe patient care in the future is a looming reality for healthcare systems in the United States. Healthcare faces an aging population, retiring experienced nurses, and higher acuity of patients seeking treatment. The first year of professional nursing is a period of acclimation and adjustment for new nursing graduates, often experiencing feelings of inadequacy, decreased self-efficacy, and incompetence leading to discontentment. Healthcare institutions have implemented various strategies such as transition to practice programs to help decrease challenges encountered and decrease turnover of new nurses entering the workforce while ensuring the safety of patients. The problem is there may be a disconnect between the skills learned in prelicensure nursing education, the transition to practice program, and the actual realities of the skills necessary to perform in the professional nursing role. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of new nursing graduates on their transition to practice program and the actual realities of professional nursing. Guided by a qualitative phenomenological design and linked to Benner's novice to expert theory, 12 new nursing graduates' experiences were captured through semi-structured face-to-face interviews to better understand the skills necessary for professional nursing practice and the barriers encountered entering the workforce. Three emergent themes were identified as communication, nursing foundation, and confidence, as expressed in interviews that gave voice to the participants regarding their experiences. This study has revealed that new nursing graduates found their experiences challenging but persevered because of their commitment to the nursing profession.

KEYWORDS: Nursing education, Health Science Education, Nursing Graduates, Transition to Practice Programs, First-year Nurses, Prelicensure Nursing Education.

INTRODUCTION:

Providing safe, quality patient care remains an essential part of the ever-changing healthcare environment. The number of people aged 65 years or older is projected to increase to 2 billion in 2050, and those 65 years or older will outnumber those under the age of five[1]. In addition, chronic conditions are on the rise, leading to a shift in complex care needs. With the uptick in the healthcare demands, the surge of nurse vacancies, and the increase in patient acuity, there is a strain on the healthcare system[2]. Without additional nurses prepared to handle the complexity of patient concerns, the healthcare status of the United States will not sustain[1,2].

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that there will be a shortfall of nine million nurses worldwide by 2030[1]. The United States is projected to experience a shortage of registered nurses (Rns), which will intensify as experienced nurses retire and healthcare services increase. The healthcare system faces several challenges, including an aging population where more than 20% will be aged 65 or older by 2040 and the loss of seasoned RNs[1,3]. Furthermore, the healthcare system must find ways to treat patients with chronic diseases and the complex patient acuity in various healthcare settings[4,5]. American Association of Colleges of Nursing speculates that the RN workforce will expand to 3.3 million by 2029, with 175,900 additional RNs needed each year to fill retiring nurses' vacancies[6]. New nursing graduates will fill these open vacancies.

Individuals entering the nursing profession possess an internal drive to care for others compassionately. The knowledge, attitude, and skills necessary to be a competent healthcare provider are essential to ensure the health and well-being of society. Many new nurses face challenges while transitioning to the role of an RN. Stressful work environments, increased patient acuity, decreased self-efficacy, deficient nursing foundational skills, and critical thinking as some of the challenges new nursing graduates face[7]. Recent nursing graduates need to apply the psychomotor skills and theory knowledge learned in prelicensure education to help the transformation from student nurse to RN.

New nursing graduates are novice practitioners entering into an environment that requires critical thinking and clinical judgment capabilities. Recent graduates need to possess the theoretical knowledge and skill mastery to provide safe patient care and effectively integrate into their professional nursing role while learning to navigate their new working environment[4]. However, novice nurses enter the workforce with deficiencies in applying prelicensure concepts and skills into professional practice[8]. The growing number of competencies and skills RNs must acquire during prelicensure education and onboarding may be overwhelming, slowing the novice nurses' progression to nursing practice[9].

Transition to practice programs provide guidance, support, and clinical skills for new nursing graduates. The transition to practice program allows new nurses to develop confidence, skill proficiency, and competencies, including critical thinking and clinical judgment necessary to provide safe patient care. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing and the Institute of Medicine (IOM) explored the various training strategies and attrition of new nursing graduates and the implications of insufficient training related to patient safety and turnover[1,2]. The IOM states that recent nursing graduates that do not receive support and guidance while transitioning to the registered nurse role are at a greater risk of moral and ethical dilemmas, burnout, turnover, and stress, which increases the propensity for practice errors[2].

There is a gap between prelicensure nursing education and nurse graduates' realities entering the workforce. The experience-complexity gap is a significant challenge for nursing graduates upon entering professional practice[9]. The experience-complexity gap invokes high stress and anxiety levels in nurses, resulting in negative consequences to the healthcare system. In addition, the disconnect between prelicensure education and professional nursing affects nurse graduates' interprofessional and intraprofessional collaboration skill proficiency.

Despite the emphasis on assisting new graduates as they move from nursing students to RN, it is unclear if the transition to practice programs effectively helps with skill acquisition. Transition to practice programs positively impact the new nurse graduate socialization and ultimately improve patient outcomes[4].

PROBLEM:

The problem is there may be a disconnect between the skills learned in prelicensure nursing education, the transition to practice program, and the actual realities of the skills necessary to perform in the professional nursing role. Novice nurses face stressful work environments, high patient-to-nurse ratios, and increased complexity of patient situations[5]. They often feel inadequately prepared to handle the clinical and sociopsychological challenges as they transition to the professional nurse role[4,5,7]. Research has shown that 61% of nursing graduates leave their first job within the first year[5,11]. Implementing a transition to practice program is one strategy to increase new graduates' self-efficacy, collaboration, critical thinking, and safe patient care as they adapt to their new role[5,7]. A study conducted by Rush et al. concludes that transition to practice programs enhance critical thinking and clinical reasoning[11]. After participating in a one-year transition to practice program, Van Patten and Bartone speculates that new graduates have improved communication, stress management, and organization skills[12].

PURPOSE:

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of new nursing graduates who have been practicing as an RN for 3 years or less in a professional nursing role on their perceptions of the transition to practice program experience and the actual realities of professional nursing. This

study investigates the prelicensure education and the transition to practice program's various components to ascertain whether the education, skills, and support provided help the novice progress to advanced beginner during their first year and how the lack of support impacts retention. This qualitative phenomenological study allows nurses to reflect and describe their lived experiences of the transition to practice program.

Comprehension of these experiences, as described by nursing graduates', may provide valuable insight to nursing managers, nurse educators, and healthcare institutions. The research study benefits nursing education and the nursing profession by identifying transition to practice program strengths and weaknesses, thereby impacting novice nurses' job satisfaction, reducing attrition rates, and increasing patient safety. By exploring the transition to practice program's influence, nurse educators and healthcare institutions can develop a curriculum to meet new nursing graduates' needs in today's changing healthcare environment creating career satisfaction and professional nursing identity.

The research questions for this qualitative phenomenological study are based on the significant literature gap relating to the experiences of new nurse graduates who participated in a transition to practice program. Therefore, the central question of this study is, what are the lived experiences of new nursing graduates' transition to practice programs? Additional questions for this research study related to the transition to practice program are as follows:

    RQ1: What are the skills necessary for novice RNs to practice as professional nurses in a prelicensure and transition to practice program?

    RQ2: What skills do novice RNs believe to be successful in a prelicensure and transition to practice program?

    RQ3: What barriers do novice RNs feel integrating into the professional nurse role?

MATERIALS AND METHODS:
This study was a phenomenological qualitative design study. This research study utilized open-ended semi-structured interview questions to capture the essence of the participants' lived experiences and enabled flexibility throughout the process[13]. Most of the questions followed the sequential order of the interview guide; however, there were times that the research moved ahead or back to another question due to the participant's response. An example of this occurred when participants were asked how they felt about their prelicensure education preparation for professional practice, which often led to questions regarding their clinical experiences.

The audio recording concluded with the participants' final thoughts. Participants were informed that a transcript would be sent via email 1 week following the interview to validate the accuracy of information through member checks. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed several times to ensure a vivid description of the lived experience was captured. Member checking is a means for participants to validate the accuracy of their lived experience[13].

DATA COLLECTION:
Table 1 expresses the demographic data that was collected for the research study.

Table 1: Table of Demographic Characteristics of Participants of the Study (N=12)

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Nursing Experience (months)	Prelicensure Nursing Education	Remained Employed at Residency Hospital
Hannah	46	Female	6	ADN	Yes
Elsy	41	Female	36	AND	No
Michael	50	Male	36	ADN	Yes
Joe	35	Male	24	ADN	Yes
Sarah	42	Female	36	ADN	Yes
Cosette	25	Female	36	ADN	Yes
Miguel	34	Male	36	ADN	Yes
Violet	32	Female	36	ADN	Yes
Jessica	40	Female	36	ADN	Yes
John	26	Male	6	ADN	Yes
Kate	26	Female	24	ADN	Yes
Ashley	25	Female	36	ADN	No

DATA ANALYSIS:
Coding of the Data:
The data was collected using semi-structured interviews, and then developed into inductive codes, allowing coding to be guided by repeated themes. The themes' identification was documented on the final column of the participants' transcript.

Once the coding process was completed for all 12 study participants, the inductive codes were grouped with the associated research question. Inductive codes are codes that are developed after examining the data[13]. The list of codes and distinct themes were identified. The first series of coding provided a preliminary list of emerging themes to begin breaking down thoughts and ideas within the transcript. Several other coding methods were utilized during the coding process, including axial and in vivo codes. Following completion of the first series of coding, the identified codes were formatted and placed into a code map in Microsoft Word to further aid in the preliminary analysis and provide a visual illustration of the findings. The next step was to begin the second series of coding to organize and further analyze codes identified in the first series. The themes were placed into a word cloud to highlight significant themes. The word cloud and a descriptive account of the findings were incorporated into this study.

RESULTS:
12 new nursing graduates were interviewed utilizing open-ended semi-structured interview questions related to three research questions regarding the lived experiences of new nursing graduates transition to practice program and prelicensure education preparation and the disconnect between the perceived and actual realities of the nursing profession. Three major themes emerged following the data analysis process and were identified as: (1) communication, (2) nursing foundation, and (3) confidence. The theoretical framework used in this study was Benner's novice to expert model, which describes the transformation of a new nurse[14,15]. The novice to expert model indicated the process new nursing graduates progress through during their careers. The five stages are as follows: (1) novice, (2) advanced beginner, (3) competent, (4) proficient, and (5) expert[14,15]. The participants of this study were at the advanced beginner and competent stage of their nursing profession.

RQ1. What are the skills necessary for novice RNs to practice as professional nurses in a prelicensure and transition to practice program?

The first research question was formed to extrapolate the essence of the lived experiences of study participants and their prelicensure and the transition to practice program skill proficiency and the skills necessary for professional practice. One theme emerged from the data, communication. Benner contends new nursing graduates begin as novices and progress through the advanced beginner stage through their experiences during the first year of practice along a continuum and reach the competent stage by the third year of practice[14,15]. It is a pivotal time for new nurses, during the first year, to receive consistent and immediate feedback from preceptors, mentors, and management to assist new nursing graduates into professional practice. The narratives of the study participants provided a detailed description of their experience and further solidified the importance of a clear and consistent line of communication. Developing effective communication provides new nurses the opportunity to understand their strengths and weaknesses to guide future practice.

RQ2. What skills do novice RNs believe to be successful in a prelicensure and transition to practice program?

The second research question was developed to ascertain what essential skills participants found necessary for new nursing graduates entering the workforce. One theme emerged from the data, nursing foundation. This aligns with Benner's skill acquisition model, indicating that new nursing graduates' skill foundation increased with time and clinical experiences. During the novice stage, new nurses learn new skills and apply them in a task-oriented manner. As new nurses acquire more experiences, they apply learned knowledge to the situation to help formulate their nursing identity[14,15]. Participants elaborated on their lived experience with skill attainment to allow this theme to emerge when understanding skills learned through prelicensure and the transition to practice program to assist with their transformation. Participants spoke openly to provide a deeper understanding of the essential skills needed to succeed in nursing.

RQ3. What barriers do novice RNs feel integrating into the professional nurse role?

The third research question was derived from uncovering the study participants' perceived barriers during their transformation to professional nursing practice. The one theme that emerged from the data was confidence. The theme materialized from the participants' reflecting on their lived experiences and provided explicit details of their experiences. Benner describes that learning alone cannot foster clinical proficiency, and the lack of trust and secureness can hinder a new nursing graduate's career progression[14,15]. If confidence is not obtained, the new nurse will become disenfranchised from the profession and ultimately leave[15]. The participants of this study provided a vivid description of the barriers encountered and elaborated on how the lack of confidence hindered and at times helped their transformation from student to RN.

DISCUSSION:
This research study explored the lived experiences of new nursing graduates' transformation to professional nursing practice. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological research study design, new nursing graduates that participated in a transition to practice program were interviewed. Open-ended semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants' perceptions of their

prelicensure nursing education and the transition to practice program experiences to better understand the essence of the new nursing graduates' transformation to the nursing profession in today's complex healthcare environment. The transcript from each interview was dissected and analyzed utilizing codes and themes that uncovered three dominant themes. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of a population of new nursing graduates with 3 years or less professional experience. Three themes emerged once saturation was confirmed: communication, nursing knowledge, and confidence.

Nursing graduates' transformation from student to RN is a unique and individual experience; however, the disconnection between the knowledge and skill set necessary for professional practice affects the new nursing graduates' ability to provide safe patient care[16,17].

Concerning this research study, limitations that existed included which participants were interviews and the attitudes and feelings of the participants. The assumption was that the participants were forthcoming and honest about their feelings related to their experience. Participants in this study agreed to participate voluntarily. Therefore, the results of this study do not reflect the experiences of all new nursing graduates participating in a transition to practice program. Another limitation was that this study focused on graduates from one collection site, which may not allow for transferability to the experiences of other new nursing graduates from different educational and healthcare institutions.

The study's findings may potentially influence the current and future status of the nursing profession. Nursing research provides the scientific basis for the practice of the job by increasing knowledge by fulfilling a knowledge gap. Research is scarce from new nursing graduates' perspectives regarding the effectiveness of transition to practice programs. As this study highlights, the reflections and attitudes of the participants will contribute knowledge for the future of nursing education, nursing practice, and nursing research.

The findings from this research study may be implemented into the nursing curriculum. Participants expressed concerns about the lack of workplace readiness due to limited clinical experiences. The results of this study may be incorporated in a prelicensure course that includes a candid discussion regarding the amount of time necessary to transition successfully, the emotional attributes, and increased awareness of the process that may decrease new nurse attrition rates. This study highlights the significance of transition to practice programs, including support and guidance by preceptors and nurse leaders, establishing good communication techniques, and realistic expectations. Additionally, the involvement of preceptors and hospital nurse leaders is essential to the attrition of new nursing graduates.

Those taking on the role of a preceptor or mentor should possess attributes of an educator and skill proficiency to support new nursing graduates' professional and personal growth. A close interrelationship between prelicensure education and clinical practice provides a current representation of the healthcare environment, including high volume and acuity of patients to facilitate learning. Nurse educators must commit to changing the understanding of new nursing graduates' success by investigating intraprofessional and interprofessional collaborative methods to ensure a competent workforce[18].

CONCLUSIONS:

The findings from this research study support the justification that a structured transition to practice program incorporating a preceptor or mentor model contributes to the improvement and sustention of new nurses. The results also show that proper introduction to the profession assists in developing and retaining new nurses. The lack of adequately trained nurses, including those newly graduated, contributes to patient safety risks such as medication errors and deficient prioritization. Shortages in nursing staff pose a threat to society due to issues surrounding a chronically overworked workforce.

A strong nursing workforce is required to respond to the needs of society and the community effectively. Hospitals face challenges partly due to the nursing shortage and the complexity of patient situations. This research study may contribute to the knowledge to incorporate orientation standards to improve the nursing transition and attrition. Improved orientation methods will also aid in delivering safe patient care by better preparing our next generation of nurses.

Future studies should focus on how the curriculum of prelicensure nursing programs' revisions in the final semester of the nursing program may improve the competencies and expectations of new nurses entering the ever-changing healthcare environment. The nursing profession relies on nursing education programs to continue providing nursing graduates to fill the nursing shortage deficiencies. The ability to critically resolve problems using competency-based assessment measures is crucial in the learning process and should be reinforced while completing nursing educational programs.

Subsequent inquiries may focus on how new nursing graduates' experiences influence attrition. Further research is warranted to explore determinates affecting the retention of new nurses and minimize future nursing shortages. Additional studies examining how supportive cultures may develop confidence and encourage effective communication to decrease turnover may further capture the new nursing graduates' experiences.

REFERENCES:

I. World Health Organization (2021). Aging and health. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health

II. Institute of Medicine. (2011). The future of nursing: Leading change, advancing health. National Academies Press.

III. United States Census Bureau. (2020, June 25). 65 and older population grows rapidly as baby boomers age. https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/65-older-population-grows.html

IV. Goode, C. J., Glassman, K. S., Ponte, P. R., Krugman, M., & Peterman, T. (2018). Requiring a nurse residency for newly licensed registered nurses. Nursing Outlook, 66(3), 329-332. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.outlook.2018.04.004

V. Letourneau, R. M., & McCurry, M. K. (2019). The effect of transition to practice programs on the self-assessment of newly licensed registered nurses' confidence in quality and safety competency attainment. Nursing Education Perspectives, 40(3), 151-156. https://doi.org/10.1097/01.NEP.0000000000000438

VI. American Association of Colleges of Nursing. (2020). Nursing shortage. https://www.aacnnursing.org/news-information/fact-sheets/nursing-shortage

VII. Eckerson, C. M. (2018). The impact of nurse residency programs in the United States on improving retention and satisfaction of new nurse hires: An evidence-based literature review. Nurse Education Today, 71, 84-90. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2018.09.003

VIII. Bennett, L. L., Grimsley, A., Grimsley, L., & Rodd, J. (2017). The gap between nursing education and clinical skills. ABNF Journal, 28(4), 96-102.

IX. Herleth, A., Virkstis, K., Renfroe, J., & Rewers, L. (2020). The challenging road to clinical competence for new graduate RNs. The Journal of Nursing Administration, 50(4), 185-186. https://doi.org/10.1097/NNA.0000000000000864

X. Labrague, L. J., & De Los Santos, J. A. (2020). Transition shock and newly graduated nurses' job outcomes and select patient outcomes: A cross-sectional study. Journal of Nursing Management, 28(5), 1070-1079. https://doi.org/10.1111.jonm.13033

XI. Rush, K. L., Janke, R., Duchscher, J. E., Phillips, R., & Kaur, S. (2019). Best practices of formal new graduate transition programs: An integrative review. International Journal of Nursing Studies, 94, 139-158. https://doi.org/10.10-16/j.ijnurstu.2019.02.010

XII. Van Patten, R. R., & Bartone, A. S. (2019). The impact of mentorship, preceptors, and debriefing on the quality of program experiences. Nurse Education in Practice, 35, 63-68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2019.01.007

XIII. Merrian, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation (4th ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

XIV. Benner, P. (1982). From novice to expert. The American Journal of Nursing, 82(3), 402-407.

XV. Benner, P. (2001). From novice to expert: Excellence and power in clinical nursing practice (Commemorative ed.). Prentice Hall Health.

XVI. Camveren, H., Yurumezoglu, H. A., & Kocaman, G. (2020). Why do young nurses leave their organization? A qualitative descriptive study. International Nursing Review, 67(4), 519-528. https://doi.org/10.1111/inr.12633

XVII. Djukic, M., Stimpfel, A. W., & Kovner, C. (2019). Bachelor's degree nurse graduates report better quality and safety educational preparedness than associate degree graduates. The Joint Commission Journal on Quality and Patient Safety, 45, 180-186. https://doi.org/10.1016.j.jcjq.2018.08.008

XVIII. Hyun, A., Tower, M., & Turner, C. (2020). Exploration of the expected and achieved competency levels of new graduate nurses. Journal of Nursing Management, 28(6), 1418-1431. https://doi.org/10.1111/jonm.13105